

The well-being of adolescent and young adult cancer survivors a cause that captivates alumna Emily Drake

2020-09-30 12:06



Alumna Emily Drake ('06) found her passion for health research at Acadia University, and her love of scientific inquiry spurred an interest in cancer research.

Drake – currently completing the PhD in Health program at Dalhousie University -- dedicates her work to the study of adolescent and young adult cancer patients: exploring the health service delivery experiences of young people living with metastatic/advanced cancer.

Nearly seven years ago, she co-founded a hashtag on Twitter for the 'Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Societal Movement' (#AYACSM), and that acronym has led to patients, caregivers and academics connecting across the world.

“I lived and breathed Acadia University while I was there, and when I look back at that time, it is truly where I developed my foundational research skills and interest in scientific inquiry. These skills equipped me to pursue subsequent degrees,” says Drake, who graduated with a Bachelor of Science with an Honours in Psychology and is currently a Killam Scholar, Beatrice Hunter Cancer Research Institute Cancer Research Training Program trainee, recent winner of the Colleen Elliott Award for Excellence in Cancer Research, and the Kappa Kappa Gamma Foundation of Canada scholarship for women pursuing a PhD in Canada.

Emily was incredibly active during her time at Acadia. She was a Welcome Week Leader and member of Acadia Power Cheer, the Acadia Dance Collective, the Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience(S.M.I.L.E.) program, the Psychology Honours Student Society, and the Acadia Ski and Snowboard Club.

“I look back at my time at Acadia so fondly. We had an amazing community. I was paired randomly to be roommates with a girl in Tully (residence) 18 years ago, and she’s still my best friend. I’m still close with the people I met there. It’s wonderful to watch their success,” she says.

“Originally, I knew I wanted to be in the health field doing something meaningful with patients, and things only just began to become more refined after graduation. I developed an interest in working with adolescents and young adults living with cancer, and now I’ve been in the field for 12 years.”

Focused on cancer survivors

Drake’s personal life also helped to define her professional interests. “In the summer between my third and fourth years at Acadia, my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer and I got to see how cancer can affect both the patient and their family – how scary and challenging it can be. My paternal grandmother was also a 27-year cancer survivor. She recently passed during – but not due to – COVID-19,” she says.

It was during her Master’s that she learned about the unique challenges that adolescents and young adults living with cancer face. They represent an under-resourced and under-researched oncology population. She worked in Montreal for nearly four years and during that time was the Director of the Young Adult Cancer Support Program at Hope and Cope, Jewish General Hospital/McGill University. She also contributed to the Huffington Post in the U.S. on adolescent and young adult cancer issues and pediatric healthcare innovation.

In 2013, she co-founded the Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Societal Movement (#AYACSM) hashtag. “I co-founded this with two U.S. colleagues because we had a desire to connect and share valuable resources related to young people with cancer,” she says. “We never would have guessed it would fit a need like we’ve seen over the years. It has been meaningful to families, academics, non-profits and patients.”

It has seen followers in North America, South America, Asia, Europe, Australia, Africa and been used by over 9,000 users around the world on Twitter alone. It has made over 235,000,000 impressions.

“This hashtag has allowed us to mobilize research findings and has helped researchers with recruitment and being able to engage with patients and families and learn what is important to them. It has allowed patients and families to connect with others who get what it is that they are going through,” Drake says. “Seeing people be able to build and foster those relationships using the hashtag is so meaningful.”

As Drake takes Twitter – and the world – by storm, she has never forgotten where she comes from. “Acadia, and its community, ended up being a huge part of my life. My friends from Acadia are family, and we champion each other’s work. Whether I’ve been studying elsewhere, blogging or working, I’ve

always felt support from my Acadia community,” she adds. “This global adolescent and young adult cancer movement has grown from the support and love of the people I met while I was starting out at Acadia.”
